Referring to women using feminine and neuter gender: Sociopragmatic gender assignment in German dialects

Simone Busley & Damaris Nübling

Abstract: In German, gender is a strongly grammaticalized category and has the function of indicating grammatical agreement between syntactic units. Usually, each noun is assigned one of three grammatical genders. In standard German, nouns denoting women are typically feminine. However, Luxembourgish and some German dialects show a peculiarity: here, the gender of female first names and other parts of speech (e.g. pronouns) referring to women can be both feminine and neuter, depending on the nature of the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the female referred to. In these varieties, gender assignment is governed by sociopragmatic factors. Sociopragmatic gender assignment is a result of de-grammaticalization, which is reflected in both syntagmatic and paradigmatic gender variability. The study shows that there is considerable diatopic variation in the use and function of gender in references to women. In some dialects, the neuter has become the default gender of female first names; this is a case of re-grammaticalization.

Keywords: first names, grammatical gender, gender agreement, sociopragmatics, grammaticalization, German dialects, Luxembourgish

1. Semantic, referential and sociopragmatic gender assignment

German has three grammatical or linguistic genders: feminine, masculine and neuter. Moreover, the language is known for the complexity of its gender assignment system (Köpcke & Zubin 1996; 2003). In addition to some (weak) phonological and (strong) morphological assignment rules which can be subsumed under formal principles, there are different semantic principles. Here, a clear distinction has to be drawn between lexical semantic principles in a narrow sense, on the one hand, and referential and sociopragmatic ones, on the other. This article will focus on the sociopragmatic type. In order to do so, we first need to define these three levels, a common feature of which is that they do not operate on the basis of formal properties of the noun. Thus, the 'locus' of gender (in the words of Dahl 2000:106), or the controller (Corbett 1991), may be an inherent part of the meaning of a noun (semantic gender), it may be determined by the concrete referent to which the noun or name refers (referential gender), or it may be determined by the relationship between speaker and (human) referent (sociopragmatic gender). The notion and concept of sociopragmatic gender was first described in Nübling, Busley & Drenda 2013. In most research about gender, these levels are not distinguished clearly enough, leading to a good deal of terminological confusion. As a positive example, Dahl (2000) explicitly differentiates between lexical semantic and referential semantic gender. This article focuses on sociopragmatic gender, which occurs in some German dialects and has only been detected very recently. For a classification of gender assignment principles that includes sociopragmatic gender, see Busley & Fritzinger 2020.

1.1 Semantic gender

Semantic gender implies that the meaning of a noun determines its gender. In German, this holds for nouns denoting fruit, for example, which always have feminine gender: *die Banane, Birne, Mango,*

Ananas [the (fem.) banana, pear, mango, pineapple]. The only two exceptions are *Apfel* [apple] and *Pfirsich* [peach], which belong to the masculine class. New fruit is automatically and productively classified as feminine. More importantly, nouns denoting humans are strictly gender-classified by the sex they denote: lexemes denoting females are feminine – *die Mutter, Tochter, Frau, Nonne* [the (fem.) mother, daughter, woman, nun] – and those denoting males are masculine – *der Vater, Sohn, Mann, Mönch* [the (masc.) father, son, man, monk]. This is the strongest rule. So-called 'linguistic gender reversals' (Aikhenvald 2016:102–109), i.e. mismatches between sex and (linguistic) gender, mostly serve to flag deviations from social norms. The few exceptions from the German gender–sex rule denote on the one hand gays – *die Schwuchtel, Tunte* [the (fem.) queen, fag] – or (male) weaklings such as *die Memme* [the (fem.) coward] and on the other hand viragos such as *der Vamp* [the (masc.) virago]. This highlights gender as a social category (social gender). We therefore have to distinguish between linguistic gender, sex and social gender (see also Hellinger 1990).

Interestingly, neuter as the residual 'third' gender, which is common for inanimate objects, is only used for females. Many neuter nouns more generally denote females who are not sexually mature – as in *das Mädchen* [the (neut.) girl] – or unmarried females perceived to be lacking a husband – as in the obsolescent example *das Fräulein* [the (neut.) miss] – or they are used as an insult, e.g. *Weib*, formerly the normal term for (married) women but today often used pejoratively. The fact that some of these nouns are diminutives (ending in *-chen* or *-lein*), which always require neuter gender on account of morphological gender assignment, provides one strategy for generating neuter nouns from originally feminine ones (e.g. *Magd, die* → *Mädchen, das*). Beyond that, many loans from English conceptualize young women as objects of male desire and are given neuter gender, e.g. *das* (neut.) *Girl, Playmate, Chick, Pin-up*. For these borrowings, no diminutive is necessary to produce the same kind of neuter gender for young women. It is striking that, in fulfilling traditional societal expectations, married mothers appear to be protected from 'third gen-

der' use and are it seems considered to deserve the appropriate feminine gender (see Köpcke & Zubin 2005; Nübling 2017). The neuter, on the other hand, marks deviations from this social norm, which has been firmly anchored for centuries. In German, there are in general only a handful of neuter nouns for socially 'deviant' men, and they also never come in the diminutive, presumably to avoid neuter gender (with few exceptions, such as *Muttersöhnchen* [mummy's boy]). To disparage men, the feminine for the 'other sex' is sufficient (see Nübling 2020).

The German nouns *Mädchen* und *Weib* are quite famous, as they serve as examples of what are termed hybrid nouns. Hybrid nouns are characterized by a conflict between grammatical (or, in the terms of Corbett 1991, syntactic) and semantic gender assignment: grammatically *Mädchen* is neuter, but semantically it refers to a female, which triggers the feminine. The morphological principle is important here because it overrides all the others. So the diminutive suffixes *-chen* and *-lein* demand neuter gender even if they attach to nouns denoting sexed humans such as *Tochter* (fem.) [daughter] → *Töchterchen* (neut.) [little daughter]; *Sohn* (masc.) [son] → *Söhnchen* (neut.) [little son]. This can lead to a mismatch in gender agreement (see also Corbett 2006; 2015; Fleischer 2012; Birkenes, Chroni & Fleischer 2014). According to Corbett's Agreement Hierarchy, which can be reduced to attributive > relative pronoun > personal pronoun for our purposes, agreements are neuter in all positions except the personal pronoun:

das Mädchen,	*das*	*ich*	*gesehen*	*habe* ...
the.neut girl	that.neut	I	seen	have

'the girl I saw …' (Corbett 1991:228)

The attributive modifier, i.e. the article *das*, and the relative pronoun *das* are neuter, whereas the personal pronoun can be feminine following semantic agreement: *Das Mädchen* (neut.) *arbeitet. Es* (neut.) / *Sie* (fem.) *hat viel zu tun* [The girl (neut.) is working. It (neut.) / She (fem.) has a lot to do]. The fact that 'semantic' agreement depends on the age of the girl denoted leads us to the next assignment level of referential gender. Braun & Haig (2010) found that girls aged 18 are more likely

to be referred to by a feminine pronoun, whereas in the majority of cases referring to girls younger than 18, a neuter pronoun is used. This shows that gender is not controlled by lexical properties, but by the referent, in this case by the age of the girls denoted.

1.2 Referential gender

Referential gender depends on properties of the referent (cf. Dahl 2000). As proper names do not carry semantic information, but rather refer directly to a specific object, their gender assignment often depends on the object denoted: in German, names of ships and aircraft are feminine (*die Albert Einstein, die Landshut*), names of towns and states are neuter (*das schöne Heidelberg* [the (neut.) beautiful Heidelberg]), and names of mountains and cars are masculine (*der K2, der Corona*) (see Fahlbusch & Nübling 2014). In general, the last constituent of a word formation determines its gender. But fully proprialized names adopt a specific referential gender, which can differ from the gender of the corresponding common noun. Although the common noun *Stadt* [town] is feminine, city names are neuter even if they contain -*stadt* as their last constituent: *das schöne Darmstadt* [the (neut.) beautiful Darmstadt]. In the case of humans, unisex first names and also surnames do not have gender. They are only gender-classified if the person's sex is known. If the German surname *Schmidt* denotes a man, it is given a masculine definite article and pronoun (*der Schmidt – er*), if it denotes a woman, the feminine is appropriate (*die Schmidt – sie*). The same holds for unisex (first) names (without nominal gender), as well as for gender-neutral nouns (with nominal gender) such as *Opfer* (neut.) [victim] or *Gast* (masc.) [guest]. The pronouns associated with them can reflect the referent's sex if it does not correspond to the grammatical gender of the noun. Thus, *das* (neut.) *Opfer* [the victim] may come with a feminine or masculine pronoun if the person behind the word is known. The same holds for the pronominal gender of *die* (fem.) *Person* [the person] or *der* (masc.) *Gast* [the guest] if the male or female referent, respectively, is known. This is not obligatory, however.

1.3 Sociopragmatic gender

Sociopragmatic gender has not been described so far as it only rarely occurs in a systematic way, as is the case in some German dialects. As far as we know, it exists for proper names referring to girls and women and only very rarely for those referring to men (Christen 1998; Nübling, Busley & Drenda 2013; Nübling 2015). Here, the relationship between speaker, addressee and (female) referent, together with the whole context of the conversation, governs the choice of gender. Roughly speaking, high familiarity between speaker and referent requires the use of neuter gender, whereas a distant relationship between speaker and referent requires feminine gender. In central and south German regions, first names come with an article indicating the gender of the name. Thus, the speaker's sister is referred to as *das* (neut.) *Anne* [the Anne], whereas the same speaker may refer to a good friend from the sports club whose family moved to the area from another village as *die* (fem.) *Lena* [the Lena]. In reality, the situation is far more complex, as further factors, sometimes referential, trigger gender selection, such as the age of the female, the age gap between speaker and the female denoted, her social status, biographical facts such as having left the village or not, whether the female referent speaks the local dialect or not, whether she is popular or not, whether the conversational situation is relaxed and familiar or not, whether the relationship between speaker and addressee as well as between addressee and referent is familiar, and so on (see Section 3). Most importantly, the choice of gender becomes optional: one and the same female may be denoted by a feminine or a neuter name or pronoun(s) depending, for example, on the conversational situation and/ or the addressee. Referring to one and the same woman, the speaker may use the feminine when speaking to his or her boss, but the neuter when speaking to an old school friend. What we have here is thus a de-grammaticalization of gender, as it has become optional and may be used for sociopragmatic purposes.

In some dialects and in Luxembourgish, the neuter has even become the unmarked gender for females (see area 1 in Section 3.1), in other dialects, the feminine is unmarked, and in still others nei-

ther of the two genders is preferred (areas 2 and 3, see Sections 3.2 and 3.3). In these cases, neuter and feminine gender are loaded with sociopragmatic information. They are not interchangeable and create a new functional opposition. Gender has become pragmaticalized. As we know, grammatical gender is strongly grammaticalized: each noun has just one fixed gender value. In contrast to the other two existing nominal categories, number (singular, plural) and case (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative), there is no paradigmatic choice for gender in German. The (present) function of gender is mainly to create grammatical agreement relations (cf. Corbett 1991:320–322). Beyond syntax, however, gender is considered to have no real function. With regard to sociopragmatic gender, it can be concluded that it has developed into a full grammatical category with functional load and paradigmatic variability (cf. Busley & Fritzinger 2021). Things become even more complicated if not only nominal but also pronominal gender is considered. Here, the gender of the female name does not have to be mirrored by the corresponding pronouns: a feminine name can be followed by a neuter pronoun and vice versa, which contradicts the definition of hybrid nouns. There is no mismatch between grammatical (syntactic) and semantic gender as described by Corbett (1991:2015). Instead, this kind of disagreement is used for sociopragmatic purposes (Busley & Fritzinger 2020). Thus, a mother talking about her daughter is likely to say: 'Das (neut.) Anna hat jetzt Abitur gemacht, sie (fem.) geht nach Mainz zum Studieren' [The Anna has now graduated from high school, she is going to study in Mainz]. By using neuter gender, she highlights her intimate relationship to her daughter. With the feminine pronoun she expresses some distance to her because her daughter is going to leave the village and go to university (i.e. a social rise).

Owing to the complexity of these dialectal systems and the fact that they had never been investigated in detail, but also because of the rapid decline of dialects, a group of three linguists started a tri-national project entitled '*Das Anna und ihr Hund* – Weibliche Rufnamen im Neutrum: Soziopragmatische vs. semantische Genuszuweisung in Dialekten des Deutschen und Luxemburgischen'. The participating

countries with so-called 'femineuter' female names were Switzerland, Luxembourg and Germany. The project was conducted from 2015 to 2020 and funded by the German Research Foundation, the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Fonds National de la Recherche Luxembourg (D-A-CH procedure). It resulted in four doctoral theses and various articles in linguistics (Busley & Fritzinger 2018; 2020; Martin 2019; Klein & Nübling 2019; Baumgartner 2019; Baumgartner et al. 2020; Baumgartner & Christen 2021). The sections that follow offer a brief presentation of the most important findings.

This paper will show that the use of neuter gender for females varies greatly among dialects and differs in terms of frequency, functional load and grammatical properties.

2. Geographical distribution of female first names in the neuter

To investigate the geographical distribution of neuter gender assignment to female first names and pronouns, an online questionnaire was used. It was distributed in particular via social media and the press, enabling it to reach people from west central and southern Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Alsace and the Netherlands. In total, the project received around 5,750 completed questionnaires (about 1,300 for German dialects, 1,750 for Swiss German, and 2,700 for Luxembourgish).

The questionnaire consisted of several parts involving different tasks, which were intended to explore the gender of different agreement targets (definite articles, pronouns, possessive articles). It also contained metalinguistic questions on neuter gender assignment. Since a sociopragmatic phenomenon was being surveyed, strict attention had to be paid to the wording of the tasks. For each task, a fictitious situational context with different referents and conversational partners was predefined. From these contexts, the relationship to the persons involved and sometimes their age could also be derived. For example, the gender of onymic articles was investigated via tasks

inviting a free response, e.g.: 'You met your mutual friend Maria for coffee yesterday. Today a friend asks you who you met. What is your answer?' The participants could answer according to their usage, e.g. *die Maria* or *das Maria*.

To investigate gender assignment in Luxembourgish, additional data from the language survey app 'Schnëssen'[1] was analysed. The users were asked to translate given sentences from German or French into Luxembourgish.

Turning to the question of areal distribution, neuter reference to females is found in a large area of western Germany, Luxembourg and parts of German-speaking Switzerland, as well as in Alsace and even parts of the Netherlands and Belgium. Our data comes from the dialect areas of West- and Eastphalian, Low Franconian, Thuringian, North and Central Hessian, Ripuarian, Limburgish, Moselle and Rhine Franconian, Alemannic and Luxembourgish. Findings from historical dialect dictionaries show that this phenomenon must have been considerably more widespread in the past. Today, the use of the female neuter is decreasing dramatically. In the north, it is disappearing along with the dialects, while in the south, younger dialect speakers are replacing it with the feminine. The neuter is most stable in Luxembourgish, where its use even appears to be expanding (cf. Martin 2019).

Figure 1 shows the current distribution of neuter pronouns referring to female persons by dialect area. It is based on the online questionnaire, covering a total of 4,879 data sets from about 1,800 locations. For the Netherlands and Germany, only questionnaires in which the participants indicated that they spoke dialect at least rarely were taken into account. The data comes from a multiple-choice task that was used to examine the pronominal gender when referring to one's own sister. The participants were instructed to imagine that someone was asking them about their sister's age. They could choose between answers with neuter and feminine pronouns, i.e. 'Ääs (neut.) is 54' or

---

[1] Schnëssen is a research and documentation project of the Institute of Luxembourgish Linguistics and Literature (University of Luxembourg). For further information, see their website (https://infolux.uni.lu/schnessen).

'Se (fem.) is 54'. The proportion of neuter pronouns varies between 2% (High Alemannic) and 97% (Luxembourgish). For the periphery of this main area, the online survey did not provide sufficient data (≤ 10 records per area) to permit valid statements on frequency. It is important to note that the prevalence of neuter pronouns is greater than that of neuter onymic articles (not shown here), as articles do not occur with first names in the more northern dialect areas of Germany and Luxembourg. However, pronouns can be neuter in those areas.

Based on the frequency of neuter pronouns, the distribution area can be divided into three main areas. The neuter is most frequent in Luxembourgish, Moselle Franconian and Ripuarian (area 1, shaded orange in Figure 1). Its frequency decreases towards the east and south. In Rhine Franconian dialects and parts of the Low Alemannic territory, the neuter is used more or less frequently depending on the local dialect (area 2, brown). In Switzerland, the lowest percentages of neuter pronouns are found (area 3, blue). We will base the following sections on this subdivision.
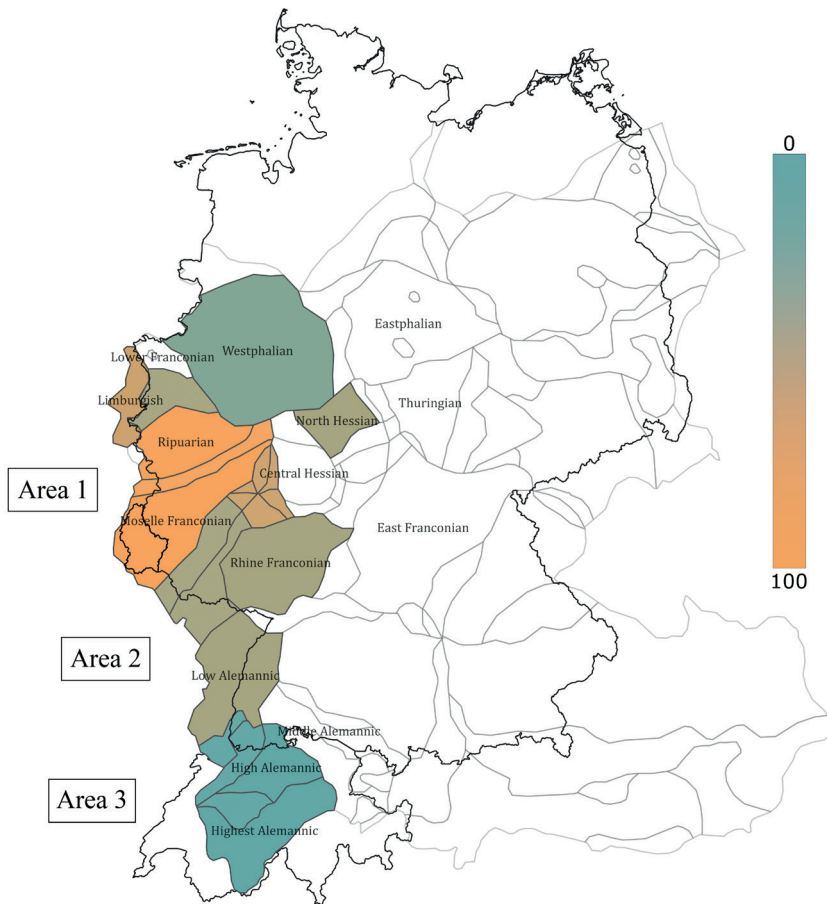
Figure 1: Percentage of neuter pronouns by dialect area (online questionnaire, multiple-choice task)[2]

3. Gender control: Sociopragmatic factors and dialectal differences

Owing to the considerable complexity of sociopragmatic gender assignment, field studies using different methods were indispensa-

---

ble. A total of approx. 240 dialect speakers were interviewed at 37 selected locations in Germany and Switzerland. The interviews were conducted in small groups with 2–3 participants. In Luxembourg, language data was collected from 16 native speakers and 9 Portuguese native speakers regardless of their place of residence. There are no regional differences in gender assignment in Luxembourgish, but it was of interest to see whether Portuguese as a native language has an influence on it.

In Germany and Luxembourg, cloze texts were used to survey the gender of definite articles, pronouns and possessive articles referring to different types of names (first names, surnames, first names in the diminutive), name combinations (first name + surname, kinship terms + first name), and other nouns denoting females (kinship terms, *Mädchen* [girl]). The participants were given 32 short texts in their dialect, each consisting of several sentences with a different number of gaps. These gaps were placeholders for the agreement targets, which were to be entered in writing by the participants. The short texts represented everyday conversations in which fictitious protagonists fulfilled various social parameters (age, relationship). The influence of sociopragmatic factors could thus be measured. These become clear from the context. The text in example 1 was used to examine gender assignment when referring to one's mother:

1) Die Mame mächt jetzt en Spanischkurs ah de Volkshochschol. _____ wollt doch schun immer mol noch Spanien. Senn mir _____ of Chrisdoog eh Res noch Madrid schenge?
   [Mum is taking a Spanish course at the community college. _____ (intended: singular third-person pronoun in the nominative case) always wanted to visit Spain. Should we give _____ (intended: singular third-person pronoun in the dative case) a trip to Madrid for Christmas?]
   (Example from the cloze text in the dialect of Mardorf, Central Hessian)

In Switzerland, a written questionnaire with different types of tasks was used instead. It contained cloze texts with hypocoristic names, which show a special gender assignment in Swiss German (see Section 3.3).

The field studies focused on oral methods. In one task, four short video sequences were shown to participants, who were asked to describe the characters' activities, e.g. drinking tea, cooking, working, going for a walk, playing (video experiment). The main characters of these short films were a little girl (Emma, approx. 4 years old), a young student (Miriam, approx. 25 years old), a middle-aged woman (Annette, approx. 50 years old) and a senior (Maria, approx. 75 years old). Their first names were shown at the beginning of the video. In particular, the video experiment was used to examine the influence of the referents' age on pronominal gender assignment.

Moreover, the informants were asked to talk in small groups about photos of their family members and friends which they had brought along themselves (photo talk). This method collected the most natural language data. In contrast to the video experiment, the informants were talking about people they really knew personally. The method was particularly suitable for investigating the influence of personal relationships on gender assignment.

At the end of each survey, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each group, addressing questions about the use and connotations of neuter gender.

Based on these surveys, the following sections show that the regional differences identified in Section 2 are actually a symptom of different sociopragmatic systems determining the gender of female first names.

3.1 Area 1: (Re-)grammaticalized neuter (and some sociopragmatic residues)

In the Ripuarian and Moselle Franconian dialects, neuter is the default gender of all female first names: not only the article, but also proforms such as personal pronouns and possessive articles referring to a female first name are neuter. Table 1 provides an overview of the gender assignment of articles and personal pronouns. The data are based on the cloze text method (cf. Section 2).

Table 1. Gender of articles and pronouns referring to female first names in Ripuarian, Moselle Franconian and the Ripuarian–Moselle Franconian transition area (cloze texts).

Dialect	Gender of articles		Gender of pronouns	
	F	N	F	N
Ripuarian	0.5% (1)	99.5% (223)	8.5% (34)	91.5% (367)
Moselle Franconian	3.3% (5)	96.7% (145)	17.3% (46)	82.7% (220)
Ripuarian–Moselle Franc. transition area	0% (0)	100% (55)	14.7% (14)	85.3% (81)

To focus first on the article, Table 1 shows that the proportion of neuter articles ranges between 96% and 100%. In these dialects, neuter gender assignment can be regarded as (re-)grammaticalized, which means that it is determined by the inherent sex information of the first name ('female' as a semantic feature). Thus, sociopragmatic factors now have almost no effect.

As Luxembourgish is based on Moselle Franconian dialects, there, too, the 'female neuter' is the unmarked case. The definite article in Luxembourgish is syncretic for gender and case, so *d'* as in *d'Anna* could be the singular nominative or accusative, in both feminine and neuter (cf. Nübling 2015:251–255). Thus, gender information only becomes overt when the proper name occurs in the dative. The gender of the article was therefore examined using a translation task involving possessive constructions, which require the dative. The results regarding the possessive dative and *von* periphrasis confirm the stability of the neuter article. Its use has a frequency of over 98% (possessive dative: 98.6% (6,544); *von* periphrasis: 98.7% (1,414)).

2) possessive dative:
    dem   *Claudia*   *säi*   *Mann*
    ART-DAT.SING.NEUT.   Claudia   POSS [NEUT]   husband
    [Claudia's husband]

3) *von* periphrasis:
    de Petzi   *vom*   *Anna*
    the teddy bear   of-ART.DAT.SING.NEUT.   Anna
    [Anna's teddy bear]

A further look at Table 1 shows that the pronouns also take neuter gender, but not as consistently as the article. They are more open to sociopragmatic influence. While in these dialects the neuter is the unmarked gender and can always be assigned to every agreement target of a first name, the feminine can be used to express special respect for the referent. Respect is closely linked to age: the feminine becomes more likely the older the woman referred to is, as shown by the data from the cloze texts (the approximate age of the referent could be derived from the context). For female referents up to 20 years old, the proportion of feminine pronouns is just 8%, for women between 20 and 60 years 13.7%, and for women over 60 years 20.9%. This is different in Luxembourgish: Martin (2019:584) shows using data from the online questionnaire that pronouns referring to female first names (example: *Leonie*, no age information given in the task) are neuter with only a few exceptions (98.7%).

The age dependence of gender assignment can be explained as a residue of an earlier sociopragmatic system in which gender was controlled by age and the nature of the relationship to the referent. We assume that in the varieties of area 1, the gender of female first names used to vary between feminine and neuter and was controlled by sociopragmatic factors, as will be described in Section 3.2. Thus, here too, the gender of female first names was de-grammaticalized, leading to paradigmatic and syntagmatic gender variability. Later, however, owing to its frequent use, neuter gender was re-grammaticalized by being connected to female first names in general. In this process, the neuter lost its dependence on pragmatic contexts and at the same time its paradigmatic variability. The result is a binary gender system for first names, where 'male' corresponds to the masculine, 'female' to the neuter.

For North Frisian dialects (which were not part of our project), an even more radical development is described: here, neuter gender has completely replaced the feminine, even with common nouns (cf. Nübling 2017). These dialects show exceptional two-gender systems, with a masculine and a neuter gender. The underlying process started with female neuters.

To conclude, we can postulate the following rule: neuter gender is always used when the speaker is on a first-name basis with the female person. The first name does not have to have been mentioned earlier in the discourse. It is sufficient if the speaker considers it appropriate to address the female by her first name, as would usually be the case with (exophoric) reference to little girls or familiar women. As a result, a neuter pronoun may even refer to a feminine noun as in (4) (cf. Busley & Fritzinger 2020). Consequently, gender agreement is inconsistent. This tendency is particularly strong for female kinship terms referring to a relative of the same age – *Schwester* (fem.) [sister], *Cousine* (fem.) [cousin] – or to a younger relative – *Tochter* (fem.) [daughter] – who are regularly referred to using a neuter pronoun (see example 4).

> 4) un deshalb fuhr jo ming schweste (appellative, fem.) als die raiffeisen neu jebaut wurde fiehrt dat (pronoun, neut.) jo emmer von hönge mem rad dürsch die jass.
> [And that's why when the Raiffeisen [= name of a bank branch] was rebuilt, my sister always rode her bike through the alley from behind.]
> (Photo talk, Ripuarian, informant female, 50)

In cases where the antecedent is a kinship term or another noun apart from a first name – e.g. *Frau* [woman] – sociopragmatic factors (age, relationship, respect) control the gender of the pronoun. Nevertheless, the first name still plays a decisive role. Consequently, neuter pronouns are not allowed when referring to more senior female relatives (e.g. one's mother or grandmother). Similarly, it is not appropriate to use their first name when referring to them. Instead, it is polite to use kinship terms to address and refer to them. Table 2 shows data from Luxembourgish (Schnëssen[3] and online questionnaire[4]) which demonstrate these reference-dependent differences in pronominal gender assignment (see also Baumgartner & Christen 2021).

---

[3] The data are taken from translations of a German (*Cousine*) or French sentence (*Schwëster*) into Luxembourgish.
[4] The data were collected with cloze texts (*Boma Colette*, *Mamm*).

Table 2. Gender of pronouns referring to female kinship terms, Luxembourgish (multiple-choice task, cloze texts).

	Feminine	Neuter
Boma [grandmother] *Colette*	99.2% (2,268)	0.8% (18)
Mamm [mother]	98.8% (2,240)	1.2% (27)
Cousine [cousin]	17.3% (58)	82.7% (277)
Schwëster [sister]	7% (88)	93% (1,165)

Note that the gender of the noun can always be displayed in the pronoun (as strict syntactic agreement), though the comparison between these cases shows that the pronominal gender is not primarily governed by feminine kinship terms, but rather by sociopragmatic factors. Moreover, dialect speakers even state that it would be wrong to use feminine anaphoric pronouns with *Tochter* [daughter] or *Schwester* [sister], as this would express too much distance. Conversely, using the neuter to refer to one's mother or a highly respected woman would be considered disparaging.

This influence of age and family role is also reflected in the data from the video experiment (Ripuarian, Moselle Franconian). The informants referred to certain protagonists by the kinship terms *Mutter* [mother] and *Tochter* [daughter], both belonging to the feminine class. The results are very clear: neuter pronouns predominate in the case of *Tochter* (neut. 69%, fem. 31%), feminine pronouns in the case of *Mutter* (neut. 21%, fem. 71%). The neuter pronouns referring to *Mutter* can be explained by the fact that for the same protagonist the first name was also used (*Annette*). In those cases, the pronouns were usually neuter (neut. 78%, fem. 22%). The pronominal gender depends on whether the woman in question is conceptualized as an acquaintance referred to by her first name, or as a mother.

Sociopragmatics also comes to the fore when a female first name is combined with a surname. Surnames usually indicate distance, especially in combination with a title such as German *Frau* [Ms] or Luxembourgish *Madame* [Ms]. Martin (2019:585) shows that, in Luxembourgish, pronouns referring to the combination title + family name (*Madame Thill*) are generally feminine (95%). However,

the combination of first name and surname causes a conflict: the first name triggers the neuter, the surname the distancing feminine. Martin (2019:591) shows that the age of the referent determines the pronominal gender in these cases. However, neuter pronouns do not steadily decrease with the age of the referent; there must be a cut-off point somewhere between the ages of 20 and 40 at which the neuter shifts to the feminine. For a 20-year-old Julie Mancini, the percentage of neuter pronouns is about 95%, while for the 40-year-old Isabelle Weiler and the 70-year-old Germaine Donven it is about 60% in each case. Overall, the proportion of neuter pronouns is very high, even for the older females. In the other areas, the use of neuter reference is much more limited. This is the topic of the following sections.

3.2 Area 2: Sociopragmatic gender assignment

Area 2 is characterized by gender variability when speakers refer to females. On the one hand, the 'female neuter' is not used in the whole area; it is only a feature of certain local dialects. Thus, it can mainly be found in the western part of the Rhine Franconian dialect area, in Alsace and in the southern part of the Low Alemannic area. On the other hand, onymic gender is much more variable compared with area 1, on both the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic level (cf. Nübling 2015; Busley & Fritzinger 2020). Furthermore, local dialects have developed their own gender assignment systems for female first names. They differ with regard to the frequency of the neuter, its sociopragmatics and its target-specific assignment. Table 3 provides an overview, comparing dialects from the Moselle Franconian–Rhine Franconian transition area, Rhine Franconian and Alemannic dialects and the Central Hessian dialect of Mardorf, based on data from the cloze text method. The numbers refer to the totality of articles and pronouns used in the cloze texts with reference to female first names.

Table 3. Gender of articles and pronouns referring to female first names in Moselle Franconian–Rhine Franconian, Rhine Franconian and Low Alemannic dialects (cloze texts).

Dialect	Location	Gender of articles		Gender of pronouns	
		Fem.	Neut.	Fem.	Neut.
Moselle Franconian–Rhine Franconian transition area	Idar-Oberstein	19.1% (8)	80.9% (34)	43.5% (37)	56.5% (48)
	Gronig	12.1% (7)	87.9% (51)	11.9% (13)	88.1% (96)
Rhine Franconian	Armsheim	55.9% (33)	44.1% (26)	78.5% (91)	21.5% (25)
	Höringen	73.7% (70)	26.3% (25)	84.4% (151)	15.6% (28)
	Donsieders	53.6% (15)	46.4% (13)	66.7% (34)	33.3% (17)
Low Alemannic	Bischoffingen	76.5% (39)	23.5% (12)	85.7% (90)	14.3% (15)
	Kiechlinsbergen	6.7% (2)	93.3% (28)	65.3% (32)	34.7% (17)
	Königschaff-hausen	76.9% (30)	23.1% (9)	97% (64)	3% (2)
	Leiselheim	10.3% (6)	89.7% (52)	32.7% (32)	67.3% (66)
Central Hessian	Mardorf	100% (40)	0% (0)	23% (17)	77% (57)

Overall, the Moselle Franconian–Rhine Franconian transition area shows high percentages for the neuter. In Rhine Franconian, the gender of both articles and pronouns varies. In Low Alemannic, the neuter is only rarely documented. The dialect of Mardorf (Central Hessian)[5] behaves differently, in that the article can only be feminine and the neuter only surfaces in the use of the pronouns.

While in grammaticalized systems (area 1), the neuter correlates strongly with female first names, comments from the online questionnaire originating from area 2 show that, here, gender assignment is controlled by nuanced sociopragmatic factors:

---

[5] For Central Hessian, very little data is available from the online questionnaire. Therefore no very general statements can be made about sociopragmatically controlled gender assignment in this dialect area. However, the variable system of Mardorf fits the characteristics of area 2.

5) Bei Frauen/Mädchen, die man kennt, sagt man meistens *äs/s* (neut.), bei Mädchen, die man nicht kennt, manchmal *äs/s* (neut.) oder *d/si* (fem.), bei fremden Frauen eher *d/si* (fem.).

[If you know a woman/girl you usually say *äs/s* (neut.), if you don't know a girl you sometimes say *äs/s* (neut.) or *d/si* (fem.), if you don't know a woman you say *d/si* (fem.).]
(Freiburg-Opfingen, Low Alemannic, informant male, 40–49)

6) Je mehr man einem Menschen vertraut und je näher man sich steht, desto mehr nutzt man das berühmte *es/das* (neut.). [...] ich mag es auch selbst nicht besonders, wenn mich ein mir nicht sehr nahestehender Mensch mit *es* (neut.) *Lena* bezeichnet. Das täuscht dann doch irgendwie eine Vertrautheit vor, die man selbst nicht so empfindet.

[The more you trust a person and the closer you are, the more you use the famous *es/das* (neut.). [...] I don't like it very much myself when a person who is not very close to me refers to me as *es* (neut.) *Lena*. That somehow feigns a familiarity that you don't feel yourself.]
(Kusel, Rhine Franconian, informant female, 20–29)

Note that in area 1 a neuter first name would not suggest a very close relationship between speaker and referent, but simply that the referent is female. In area 2, the neuter may only be used to refer to a woman who is very close to oneself. Otherwise it will be perceived as intrusive, as stated in (6). In both comments, it is clear that the nature of the relationship plays a decisive role in gender assignment. In addition, the influence of the referent's age surfaces in comment (5). Whether the feminine or the neuter is chosen to refer to a female depends on the complex interplay of the following sociopragmatic factors (cf. Busley & Fritzinger 2020):

1. Characteristics of the referent (age),
2. relationship between speaker and referent,
3. relationship between speaker and addressee,
4. relationship between addressee and referent.

We can demonstrate the complexity of sociopragmatically controlled gender assignment using the example of the village of Donsieders. A comparison of the data from the video experiment and from the photo talk demonstrates the general influence of the factor 'relationship': neuter articles and pronouns for female first names were quite

frequent in the photo interview, in which participants talked about females from their circle of acquaintances and female family members (articles: 69% (96) neuter, personal pronouns: 66% (40) neuter). In the video experiment with references to unknown female persons, neuter articles were only found in 7% of cases (2) and neuter pronouns occurred in 28% of cases (46).

In the dialects of area 2 (Table 3), the proportions of neuter articles and pronouns differ more or less strongly from each other. This indicates an inconsistency in the gender agreement of female first names. Neuter and feminine gender can switch within the same anaphoric chain, also depending on the sociopragmatic factors listed above.

An extract taken from the video experiment in Mardorf illustrates this. Here the speaker refers to the little girl Emma, alternating between feminine and neuter pronouns:

7) die (ART-FEM.NOM.SING) emma mim kängeru. […] ach, un do hot=s (PRON-NEUT.NOM.SING.) noch e schäfje […]. Freut se (PRON-FEM.NOM.SING.) sich. […] jetz trinkt=s (PRON-NEUT.NOM.SING.) erschtemo wasser. Hot se (PRON-FEM.NOM.SING.) doscht. […] dem (PRON-NEUT.DAT.SING.) schmeckts.
[Emma with the kangaroo. […] Oh, and there she has got a lamb. […] She is happy. Now she is first drinking water. She is thirsty. She likes it.]
(Mardorf, Central Hessian; informant female, 84)

As already mentioned, in Mardorf the article of female first names is always feminine. With regard to pronouns, inconsistent gender assignment can be explained by conflicting sociopragmatic factors: on the one hand Emma is a young girl, triggering the neuter, on the other hand she is unknown to the speaker, indicated by the use of feminine gender. Neither the neuter nor the feminine would be wrong in this case.

Gender conflicts also arise when the participants in the conversation have different relationships to the female referent. Here, the choice of gender not only depends on the relationship between speaker and referent, but also on the addressee's relationship to the referent – as well as to the speaker. The following excerpt from a photo talk situation demonstrates this. A married couple (S1 and S3) and an acquaint-

ance of theirs (S2) are speaking about the daughter of S1 and S3 (who is called Sabine).

8) S1: dreiezwanzich johr is jo die (ART-FEM.NOM.SING) sabine schun in [place name], weil=s (PRON-NEUT.NOM.SING.) hot jo in [place name] gelernt. […]

S2: un war se (PRON-FEM.NOM.SING.) dann – hat se (PRON-FEM.NOM.SING.) dann no de lehr glei – is se (PRON-FEM.NOM.SING.) dann glei no [place name], oder was?

S3: die (PRON-FEM.NOM.SING.) hat erschd – nä, es (PRON-NEUT.NOM.SING.) hat doch e halb stell kriet in [place name], weil die hattn kä volli stell wie se (PRON-FEM.NOM.SING.) ausgelernt hot. Un hot enner gesaht: 'eija, e halb stell konnsche krieje'. Un do is des (PRON-NEUT.NOM.SING.) moins fortgefahr, war middas schun do, no hot=s (PRON-NEUT.NOM.SING.) gesaht: 'des hat jo kä wert'.

[S1: Sabine has already been in [place name] for twenty-three years. Because she did her apprenticeship in [place name]. S2: And was she then – after the apprenticeship, has she then – did she move straight to [place name] or what? S3: First she got – no, she got half a job in [place name], because they didn't have a full job when she had finished her apprenticeship. And then someone said, 'You can get half a job'. And then she left in the morning, came back at noon, then she said: 'That's no use'.].
(Höringen, Rhine Franconian, informants: S1 = female, 75 years, S2 = female, 25 years, S3 = male, 76 years)

In this exchange, the articles accompanying female first names are always feminine, but some of the pronouns are neuter. In (8), the spouses S1 and S3 are talking about their daughter Sabine. S1 starts with a neuter pronoun. Their acquaintance S2 is not well acquainted with Sabine and is younger than her. Therefore, she consistently uses feminine pronouns. Subsequently, the reference chain produced by S3 shows several gender shifts: by using the feminine, S3 adapts to the nature of S2's relationship to Sabine, whereas neuter uses are triggered by the mother–daughter relationship.

In the last two examples, the gender shifts resulted from the speaker adapting ad hoc to the specific situation. However, gender shifts between articles and pronouns can also be functionalized, which means that the syntagmatic split is used to indicate the nature of a specific relationship. This can be demonstrated by revisiting the

dialect of Donsieders (see also Busley & Fritzinger 2020:371–372). Table 4 summarizes the possible combinations and their specific sociopragmatic functions.

Table 4. Agreement types of female first names in the dialect of Donsieders (Rhine Franconian).

Type	Agreement pattern	Sociopragmatic parameters
a)	ART.F. – PRON.F.	strangers, highly respected women
b)	ART.N. – PRON.N.	female peers from one's inner circle
c)	ART.F. – PRON.N.	females from one's inner circle (locals, relatives), to whom there is some kind of distance (antipathy, great difference in age)

The all-feminine pattern of type (a) is used to refer to strangers or highly respected women (e.g. one's mother-in-law). It is associated with any kind of social distance, while the neuter pattern in type (b) refers to females from one's inner circle (peers, relatives and locals of the same age) and is associated with familiarity. Particularly interesting is type (c) as a hybrid pattern of feminine articles and neuter pronouns, which is used to refer to females who fit the sociopragmatic parameters of both types (a) and (b). The combination of feminine and neuter gender correlates with a crossing of parameters of types (a) and (b): the referent is always a woman or girl from the inner circle of the speaker and therefore qualifies for the neuter. Certain factors, such as emotional distance, however, demand feminine gender. With pattern (c), the referent may be a female who actually belongs to the speaker's inner circle but who has a more reserved relationship to them or who is somewhat estranged (e.g. a cousin who moved away from the village quite some time ago). Referents in this category can include local women who the speaker has known all their life, but who the speaker dislikes. This is illustrated in the following example originating from the photo talk task, where the speaker talks disparagingly about a woman named Brigitte:

9) die (ART-FEM.NOM.SING) brigitte. Do gugg doch mol, jedes macht e normal gesicht, nur das (PRON.NEUT.NOM.SING) muss SO mache!

> [Brigitte. Take a look. Everyone has a normal facial expression, but she has to have an expression like THAT.]
> (Donsieders, Rhine Franconian, informant female, 50–59)

Pattern (c) also applies to younger female relatives. The fact that they are not referred to with a neuter article as in (b) could be due to the large age difference. Women of the younger generation represent a different type of woman. For the speakers, the neuter fits better with an outdated image of women (rural, domestic) and does not seem appropriate for a modern young female. An informant explains that the feminine article expresses 'appreciation' of younger people. On the other hand, it may be the result of an adaptation to the younger generation's dialect, in which – also related to the changing image of women – the neuter is about to disappear. The fact that the neuter is gradually being replaced by the feminine is also shown by the interviews in Donsieders: older dialect speakers refer to their daughters with a neuter article, but to their (great-)granddaughters with a feminine article, while the middle generation makes exclusive use of the feminine article when referring to their daughters and granddaughters (cf. Baumgartner et al. 2020).

Inconsistent agreement is also found in the pronominalization of feminine nouns such as kinship terms. Just as in area 1, the neuter is off-limits when referring to more senior relatives like mothers and grandmothers. In the case of kinship terms of the same age group or younger – e.g. *Schwester* [sister], *Tochter* [daughter] – the choice of neuter or feminine depends on other sociopragmatic factors, e.g. the relationship between addressee and referent.

3.3 Area 3: The feminine as default gender and the neuter as hypocoristic gender

Area 3 is comprised of Swiss German dialects. Here, neuter articles and pronouns occur in the High Alemannic dialects. Compared with area 2, the 'female neuter' is even more restricted in that it is only used to refer to females from the closest family circle. This is highlighted in the following comment taken from the online questionnaire:

10) Innerhalb der Familie wird bei Mädchennamen eher *s* (neut.) gebraucht als im Bekanntenkreis ausserhalb der Familie. [...] die Elterngeneration sagt immer noch *s* (neut.) *Martina*, *s* (neut.) *Anna*,... Ich selbst sage ausserhalb der Familie ausnahmslos *d* (fem.) *Martina*, *d* (fem.) *Anna*, passe mich innerhalb aber unbewusst an.
[Within the family, it is more common to use the article *s* with female first names than when referring to someone who is not part of the family. Our parents' generation still use *s* (neut.) *Martina*, *s* (neut.) *Anna*,... To refer to females who do not belong to the family, I always use *d* (fem.) *Martina*, *d* (fem.) *Anna*. But when I talk to my family, I unconsciously adapt to their pattern.]
(Aargau, High Alemannic, informant female, 30–39)

The following comment confirms the hypocoristic function of neuter names:

11) [W]enn min Vater mich bi bsundere Glägeheite mit *liebs* (neut.) *Helen* agredt hed, isch das für mich wien en Streicheleinheit gsi, also Koseform. Mini Tochter isch *s* (neut.) *Nathalie*, sie hasst die sächlichi Bezeichnig und loht sich die nur vo mir lo gfalle.
[When my father addressed me as *dear* (neut.) *Helen* on special occasions, it was like a caress, a pet name. My daughter is *s* (neut.) *Nathalie*, she detests it when the neuter is used with her name and she only accepts it when I do it.]
(Lucerne, High Alemannic, informant female, 60–69)

In Swiss German dialects, the 'female neuter' tends to be resisted, especially by the younger generations. In recent decades, women have played a more and more important role in public life, so the neuter, which is associated with privacy, domesticity and village life, is not compatible with a changed (self-)perception of women (Christen 1998:276). As a result, using the neuter together with a female name in public contexts has a pejorative, disparaging effect (Baumgartner 2019). In Switzerland, the 'female neuter' phenomenon has been the subject of feminist language criticism, whereas in Germany it was regarded until very recently as a marginal dialect phenomenon. Because of these developments in Switzerland, the Swiss German neuter for females is increasingly limited to contexts expressing the most intimate relationships. In some parts, it is even about to die out.

Evidence of neuter (formerly) being the unmarked gender for females can be found in a grammar of Bernese German, according to which the feminine article was only used to refer to highly respected women (Marti 1985:81):

> [A]lle weiblichen Eigennamen [sind] grammatisch Neutra, und zwar in normaler wie in diminuierter Form: *ds Anna*, *ds Anni*, *ds Anneli* oder *Änneli*. Eine Ausnahme bilden ausgesprochene Respektspersonen [...]. Die neuere umgangssprachliche Entwicklung neigt dazu, das natürliche Geschlecht zu übernehmen: d Katrin, d Helen, d Maria.
>
> [All female proper names are grammatically neuter, both simplex forms and diminutives: *ds Anna*, *ds Anni*, *ds Anneli* or *Änneli*. An exception is persons who command exceptional respect [...]. The more recent tendency in colloquial language is to adopt the biological sex: *d Katrin*, *d Helen*, *d Maria*.]

Thus, the once highly respectful feminine is increasingly replacing the neuter in all contexts. The feminine is now the unmarked, default gender used to refer to females. This is reflected in the data from our field studies: the proportion of feminine gender assignment to articles and pronouns associated with female first names is significantly higher than the proportion of neuter gender assignment.

Data from the Swiss questionnaire shows that in nine out of eleven locations, the proportion of feminine articles ranges between 86% and 100% and that of feminine pronouns between 70% and 100%. The most notable exception is the village of Nunningen, with a 77.8% share of neuter articles, but exclusively feminine pronouns.[6] Note that a high proportion of feminine articles does not always correlate with a high proportion of feminine pronouns. In data from the villages of Saanen, Plaffeien and Visperterminen for example, the proportion of neuter pronouns is comparatively high (30–42%), despite the fact that the articles are mainly feminine.

Moreover, the data from the questionnaire indicates an influence of the referent's age on pronominal gender assignment: the proportion of the neuter is highest (33%) when speakers are referring to the

---

[6] The fact that no neuter pronouns were used for females is due to the methodology. Although they are not reflected in the data, these forms are basically possible in Nunningen and they do occur in our data acquired by other methods.

youngest female, Nicole (daughter, 9 years). For Lena (sister, 45 years) it is 22% and for Erika (neighbour, retired) only 12%. Furthermore, in the video experiment, neuter articles are comparatively rarely documented for female first names (6%), whereas in the photo talk they occur more frequently (19%). This also suggests that the neuter is limited to intimate contexts.

The neuter is often associated with diminutives, since diminutive suffixes such as *-chen* and *-lein/-li* always trigger the neuter, both in standard German and in most dialects (see Section 1). In addition, diminutives have been used much more frequently for women than for men. The Swiss online questionnaire confirms this: when asked which first names ending in *-li* the participants knew from their circle of acquaintances, a majority of 85% (2,280) were female names (see also Baumgartner & Christen 2017).

Swiss German dialects, however, show some special features regarding diminutives. On the one hand, the suffix *-i* can also trigger the neuter, e.g. *ds* (neut.) *Anni*. In other German varieties, *-i* has the additional function of creating hypocoristic names in which the gender of the base is always preserved, e.g. *die* (fem.) *Anni*. On the other hand, Swiss German diminutives show sex-specific gender assignment. Male names in the diminutive are not only rarer, but their article is usually masculine (except in Highest Alemannic), e.g. *dr* (masc.) *Ruedi*, *dr* (masc.) *Hansjakobli* (cf. Baumgartner & Christen 2017). The 'female neuter' has thus retreated strongly in the face of morphological triggers which themselves express closeness and intimacy.

This striking sex-specific gender assignment can also be found with hypocoristic kinship terms such as *ds* (neut.) *Mami/Mueti* [the mummy] versus *dr/de* (masc.) *Papi/Vati* [the daddy]. They occur frequently in everyday language and nowadays even appear in Swiss standard language texts (see Christen 1998). Further examples of lexicalized neuter hypocoristics for female relatives are *Grosi* [granny], *Gotti* [godmother] and *Tanti* [aunty]. Data on *Mami* from the online questionnaire shows that the neuter article is the norm throughout Switzerland (cf. Baumgartner & Christen 2021), but in terms of pronominalization the feminine predominates: in a multiple-choice task,

75% of the participants preferred the combination of neuter article and feminine pronoun, while the combination of both neuter article and pronoun was only chosen by 23%. Feminine articles were selected in just a small number of cases (3%). In contrast, hypocoristic terms for the father (*Papi*, *Vati* or *Dädi*) nearly always take masculine articles (99%). Note that a reference to one's mother or grandmother in areas 1 and 2 can never be neuter, as that would violate the politeness rules. In Swiss varieties, morphology is a loophole through which the neuter is able to pass: it can also be used to refer to more senior female relatives, so that even neuter pronouns are rare but possible. This again confirms the association between the neuter and the most intimate and familiar relationships in Swiss dialects.

4. Conclusion

In standard German, first names have only one gender, which is derived from semantics: male first names are always masculine, female first names always feminine. The source of gender is therefore lexical. Lexical gender is strongly grammaticalized and serves to indicate grammatical agreement between syntactic units. Hence, the gender of first names and their anaphoric elements always matches.

A closer look at some German-speaking areas has revealed 'female neuters', which are influenced by a variety of sociopragmatic factors. While in area 2 sociopragmatic parameters govern the use of the female neuter, it has become evident that in area 1 the neuter has developed to become the unmarked gender used for girls and women. It only indicates female sex and is not an expression of an intimate relationship. This is because neuter gender used to be and still very frequently is used together with female first names. In this area, feminine pronouns signalling social distance and advanced age are the last remnants of an earlier sociopragmatic system. Thus, a re-grammaticalization has taken place: today, female first names are closely linked to neuter gender. These findings are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Female first names in standard German and German dialects: status of grammaticalization and associated features.

Status of grammaticalization	Source of gender	Agreement	Default gender of female first names	Example	Variety
grammaticalized	lexical (female sex)	consistent	F	*die* (fem.) *Anna* – *sie* (fem.)	Standard German and most German dialects
de-grammaticalized	socio-pragmatic	variable	no default gender	*die* (fem.)/*das* (neut.) *Anna* – *sie* (fem.) / *es* (neut.)	Dialects of areas 2 and 3
re-grammaticalized	lexical (female sex)	(mostly) consistent	N	*et Anna* (neut.) – *et* (neut.), rarely *se* (fem.)	Dialects of area 1 and Luxem-bourgish

In the Swiss German area 3 we have observed another development, whereby the former neuters are associated with specific diminutive or hypocoristic endings. Apart from that, in this area we can observe a decrease in 'female neuters' partly owing to linguistic criticism. Here, the feminine is expanding again and replacing the earlier neuter.

As we have seen, the influence of sociopragmatic factors is extremely diverse, covering everything from the age of the female referent to the relationship of the interlocutors. This can best be explained by the historical development of the language, which is not the topic of this article. As pointed out by Busley & Fritzinger (2018), the original neuter–feminine choice was governed by the social status of the girl or woman denoted: unmarried, dependent women of low social status who belonged to the domain of a patriarch were usually assigned neuter gender, whereas married women and mothers of high social status were assigned the feminine. Thus, the gender system represented vertical social deixis. Over the course of centuries, this vertical system was transformed into a horizontal one by way of pragmatic change, a process supported by currently valid factors such as relationship, familiarity, the conversational situation etc. The present-day dialectal systems show different blendings of the old and

new systems. The fact that, to this day, (grand)mothers mostly resist neuter gender assignment is a residue of the old vertical system. Conversely, young girls and unmarried young women are prototypically referred to using neuter gender.

References

Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 2016. *How gender shapes the world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baumgartner, Gerda. 2019. *S. Doris in däm wisse Fätze:* Das Neutrum als affektives Genus im Namengebrauch der Deutschschweiz. *Linguistik Online* 98(5). 137–156.

Baumgartner, Gerda, Busley, Simone, Fritzinger, Julia & Martin, Sara. 2020. *Dat Anna*, *et Charlotte* und *s Heidi*: Neutrale Genuszuweisung bei Referenz auf Frauen als überregionales Phänomen. In Christen, Helen, Ganswindt, Brigitte & Herrgen, Joachim (eds.), *Regiolekt – Der neue Dialekt? Akten des 6. Kongresses der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Dialektologie des Deutschen (IGDD)* (Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik – Beihefte, 158), 175–192. Stuttgart: Steiner.

Baumgartner, Gerda & Christen, Helen. 2021. *Anneli*, *Ruedi*, *Mami:* Annali, Ruedi, Mami. Das Diminutiv und seine Rolle bei der Entstehung und Verfestigung onymischer Neutra. In Christen, Helen et al. (eds.), Pragmatik der Genuszuweisung, 177–208. *Linguistik online* 107(2).

Baumgartner, Gerda & Christen, Helen. 2017. *Dr Hansjakobli und ds Babettli* – Über die Geschlechtstypik diminuierter Rufnamen in der Deutschschweiz. In Reisig, Martin & Spieß, Constanze (eds.), *Sprache und Geschlecht*, vol. 2 (Osnabrücker Beiträge zur Sprachtheorie 91), 111–145. Duisburg: Universitätsverlag Rhein-Ruhr KG.

Birkenes, Magnus Breder, Chroni, Kleopatra & Fleischer, Jürg. 2014. Genus- und Sexuskongruenz im Neuhochdeutschen: Ergebnisse einer Korpusuntersuchung zur narrativen Prosa des 17. bis 19. Jahrhunderts. *Deutsche Sprache* 42. 1–24.

Braun, Friederike & Haig, Geoffrey. 2010. When are German 'girls' feminine? How the semantics of age influences the grammar of gender agreement. In Bieswanger, Martin, Motschenbacher, Heiko & Mühleisen, Susanne (eds.), *Language in its socio-cultural context*, 69–84. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Busley, Simone & Fritzinger, Julia. 2018. *Em Stefanie sei Mann* – Frauen im Neutrum. In Hirschauer, Stefan & Nübling, Damaris (eds.), *Namen und Geschlechter: Studien zum onymischen Un/doing Gender* (Linguistik – Impulse & Tendenzen 76), 191–212. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.

Busley, Simone & Fritzinger, Julia. 2020. *De Lena sein Traum:* Soziopragmatisch motivierte Genusvariabilität weiblicher Rufnamen. In Kempf, Luise, Schmuck, Mirjam & Nübling, Damaris (eds.), *Linguistik der Eigennamen* (Linguistik – Impulse & Tendenzen), 347–376. Berlin/Bosten: De Gruyter.

Busley, Simone & Fritzinger, Julia. 2021. Neutrales Rufnamengenus zwischen Semantik und Pragmatik. Linguistik online 107(2). 125-144.

Christen, Helen. 1998. *Die Mutti* oder *das Mutti*, *die Rita* oder *das Rita*? Über Besonderheiten der Genuszuweisung bei Personen- und Verwandtschaftsnamen in schweizerdeutschen Dialekten. In Schnyder, André, Bartholemy-Teusch, Claudia, Fleith, Barbara & Wetzel, René (eds.), *Ist mir getroumet mîn leben? Vom Träumen und vom Anderssein: Festschrift für Karl-Ernst Geith zum 65. Geburtstag*, 267–281. Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag.

Corbett, Greville. 1991. *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Corbett, Greville. 2006. *Agreement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Corbett, Greville. 2015. Hybrid nouns and their complexity. In Fleischer, Jürg, Rieken, Elisabeth & Widmer, Paul (eds.), *Agreement from a diachronic perspective*, 191–214. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Dahl, Östen. 2000. Animacy and the notion of gender. In Unterbeck, Barbara, Rissanen, Matti, Nevalainen, Terttu & Saari, Mirja (eds.), *Gender in grammar and cognition*, 99–115. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.

Fahlbusch, Fabian & Nübling, Damaris. 2014. *Der Schauinsland – die Mobiliar – das Turm:* Das referentielle Genus bei Eigennamen und seine Genese. *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 49(3). 245–288.

Fleischer, Jürg. 2012. Grammatische und semantische Kongruenz in der Geschichte des Deutschen: Eine diachrone Studie zu den Kongruenzformen von ahd. *wīb*, nhd. *Weib. Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 134. 163–203.

Hellinger, Marlis. 1990. *Kontrastive Feministische Linguistik: Mechanismen sprachlicher Diskriminierung im Englischen und Deutschen*. München: M Hueber.

Klein, Andreas & Nübling, Damaris. 2019. 'Was ist es mit diesem grammatisch ungeheuerlichen "ihns"?' Zu Form und Funktion von alem. *ääs, ihns* und lux. *hatt. Linguistik Online* 98(5). 51–76.

Köpcke, Klaus-Michael & Zubin, David. 1996. Prinzipien für die Genuszuweisung im Deutschen. In Lang, Ewald & Zifonun, Gisela (eds.), *Deutsch – typologisch: IdS, Jahrbuch 1995*, 473–491. Mannheim: De Gruyter.

Köpcke, Klaus-Michael & Zubin, David. 2003. Metonymic pathways to neuter-gender human nominals in German. In Panther, Klaus-Uwe & Thornburg, Linda L. (eds.), *Metonymy and Pragmatic Inferencing*, 149–166. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Marti, Werner. 1985. *Berndeutsch-Grammatik für die heutige Mundart zwischen Thun und Jura*. Bern: Francke Verlag.

Martin, Sara. 2019. *Hatt* or *si*? Neuter and feminine gender assignment in reference to female persons in Luxembourgish. *STUF – Language Typology and Universals. Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung* 72 (4). 573–602.

Nübling, Damaris. 2015. Between feminine and neuter, between semantic and pragmatic gender assignment: Hybrid names in German dialects and in Luxembourgish. In Fleischer, Jürg, Rieken, Elisabeth & Widmer, Paul (eds.), *Agreement from a diachronic perspective*, 235–265. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.

Nübling, Damaris. 2017. Funktionen neutraler Genuszuweisung bei Personennamen und Personenbezeichnungen im germanischen Vergleich. In Helmbrecht, Johannes, Nübling, Damaris & Schlücker, Barbara (eds.), *Namengrammatik* (Linguistische Berichte, Sonderheft 23), 173–211. Hamburg.

Nübling, Damaris. 2020. Geschlecht in der Grammatik: Was Genus, Deklination und Binomiale uns über Geschlechter(un)ordnungen berichten. *Muttersprache* 130. 17–33.

Nübling, Damaris, Busley, Simone & Drenda, Juliane. 2013. Dat Anna und s Eva – Neutrale Frauenrufnamen in deutschen Dialekten und im Luxemburgischen zwischen pragmatischer und semantischer Genuszuweisung. *Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik* 80(2). 152–196.

Wiesinger, Peter. 1983. Die Einteilung der deutschen Dialekte. In Besch, Werner, Knoop, Ulrich, Putschke, Wolfgang & Wiegand, Herbert Ernst (eds.), *Dialektologie: Ein Handbuch zur deutschen und allgemeinen Dialektforschung*, vol. 2 (Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, 1.2), 807–900. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.